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ABSTRACT

A study was done to investigate if women still fear success particularly in their careers. Originally introduced as a concept in 1968, "fear of success" has been attributed to familial socialization and interacting psychological influences and cultural norms and usually results in precipitating behavior that undermines success. Using a 20-item "Fear of Success" questionnaire, two groups of women, either midwestern women professionals who belonged to business and professional women's organizations, or students enrolled in classes in the education department of a medium-sized midwestern university, were polled. Survey data were collected from a total of 204 subjects of whom 45 percent were students, 36 percent were professional, eight percent were clerical, 7 percent were management, and 4 percent were technical. Three one-way analysis of variance was performed on the total mean score and each of the demographic questions and found no significant differences. A lack of extreme scores and significant data led researchers to conclude that the questionnaire may be flawed, that the sample size was too small or that there is no longer a fear of success in women. Changes in social mores and child rearing may have brought about significant changes in women's attitudes and beliefs. Included are 16 references and one table. (JB)

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Fear of Success in Women--
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Fear of Success in Women--
Is There Still Such a Phenomenon?

The purpose of this study is to investigate if there is still such a phenomenon of fear of success for women.

Horner (1968) introduced the concept of fear of success, or as was originally termed, "motive to avoid success" to better explain why many women accomplish less than their full potential. Women have a "disposition to become anxious about achieving success because they expect negative consequences (such as social rejection and/or feeling of being unfeminine) as a result of succeeding" (Horner, 1972, p. 159).

Fear of success in women is allegedly a pervasive phenomenon affecting women's career development. Popular literature assails women with the idea that they, too, may have the fear of success (Working Woman, Sept. 1986; Working Mother, July 1988). Many women ascend almost to the top in corporations and for some seemingly unexplained reason exhibit defeatist behaviors that bar their futher ascent. Women affected by this phenomenon are, many times, unaware that they are afraid of succeeding. This subconscious process may result in gradual decrease in proficiency and may prove detrimental to career development. With more and more women entering the work force and choosing to pursue a career--not just a job--it is important for professionals to recognize the existing problems.

The factors contributing to the fear of success in women can be categorized as follows: familial socialization, psychological influences, and cultural norms. These factors interact with one another throughout an individual's life and any one or combination can precipitate behavior that undermines success. Ultimately in the past, familial socialization, psychological influences, and cultural norms have produced in women, a phenomenon referred to as the fear of success.

Familial socialization can be thought of as a developmental process in which the individual learns the expected behavioral traditions of a family. Interactive factors of familial socialization can be from past experiences or from present situations which influence the individual's behavior and in turn produce social consequences. Socialization very often produces responses set among women which provide options only in traditional roles and occupations (Fitzgerald and Crites, 1980).

Fear of success can develop in females even in families that value achievement. High standards of achievement are valued in the familial structure, yet girls can be discouraged if they are too competitive. Parents tend to encourage and reward affiliative and cooperative behavior over competitive behavior in daughters. For example, boys are socialized to be competitive, aggressive and achievement oriented in their careers, but girls are socialized to be noncompetitive, nurtured, and passive in their behavior (Gupta, 1983; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Therefore these same women retreat from competitive situations for fear they will be resented and ostracized.

An unsupportive spouse or significant other can also foster the motive of fear of success. The attitude of a spouse has

great impact on a woman's attempts to achieve success. For instance, the non-supportive spouse may recognize his wife's talent, but will not encourage it. He may incessantly irritate her about the new title or the new degrees she has obtained, and yet, maintains that he is proud of her. He may even encourage her and yet insist that she continue with the major domestic responsibilities. This ambiguous behavior can significantly hinder career achievement. These women feel threatened at home and are constantly worrying about their partners feeling intimidated to their success (Pauldi, Fankell-Hause, 1982).

Psychological influences are those personal factors that tend to sway the person's thinking. Attitudes and beliefs are examples of psychological influences. Women tend to develop attitudes and beliefs about themselves that perpetuate fear of success. One such attitude is guilt. Women who have a fear of success orientations and feel guilty, subconsciously need to punish themselves for some past "mistake". They, therefore, fail to obtain a much desired goal. By doing so, women assuage their guilt by inducing psychological pain. For example, a woman who feels guilty about leaving her child when she goes back to work may "punish" herself by failing to meet an important deadline, therefore, not achieve her potential. As a result, she feels guilty over her "transgression" of leaving her child, but she is still not able to accept success.

Still another attitude that perpetuates the fear of success is viewing a career like a new game or toy instead of important facet of her life. Many times this game is viewed as a "trial and error" approach. Women try it and if the game works, they continue; if not, they quit. For example, the woman may be almost totally consumed with the idea of getting ahead, however, she may still subconsciously consider the option of quitting or settling for something less than the desired goal. If the work world becomes competitive and stressful, she simply withdraws from the game. These women do not view themselves as quitters. They tried the game and didn't like it. Women who equate a career with a game are afraid of actually achieving success because they fear it will impose difficult demands and a lack of commitment to any long-term goals (Gupta, 1983).

Another commonly held belief that women display is that any success is "just luck." Women with a fear-of-success orientation tend to be more likely to rely on external factors such as luck for an explanation for successes or the belief that anyone could have accomplished what they did (Gupta, 1983; Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1977). These women are externally controlled and have a diffcult time accepting responsibility for achievement.

The third factor which influences a woman's fear of success is attributed to cultural norms. Our society has only recently endorsed authoritative behavior in women at work. Early in life, women are taught that men have authority to manage the family's place in the external world, while women handle the internal world of the family and children (Chodorow, 1978). Women are encouraged to be nurturers, while men are encouraged to be achievers. Later in life, it is men who generalize the authority to work and it is women who are trained to take leadership under

the support of, or in the shadow of, a man (Bayles and Newton, 1978).

Another cultural norm that can contribute to the fear of success is actually a deficit on our society. The fact is that most women have no role model of a career woman who is highly successful in the work world (Douvan, 1976). As mentioned, men have traditionally filled the leadership and authoritative roles. Consequently, a professional woman aiming for the top is a pioneer and has had few role models (Douvan, 1976). Women at the top have never before existed in meaningful numbers, so those who succeeded professionally are very rare. Even though we may examine their lives as role models, these women are an anomaly which make their lives unique. There really are no guidelines for young professional women in our cultures. Role models have shown to be extremely important to development(Block, 1978). If a female has no adequate role model for women-in-management positions in the work world, she is much less likely to behave in a successful manner because she is going against what has been learned.

In addition to the lack of role models, many women have had no mentors (Fitt & Newton, 1981). Mentor relationships can be effective means for women to improve their career positions. Mentors can help mentees by helping them in the following ways: advise mentee on career goals, advancement, strategies, instruction in technical as well as social-managerial skills, visibility and exposure, counseling about work-related or personal problems, encouragement, confrontation, and actual opportunities to perform new skills that are acquired (Phillips-Jones, 1983). However, msny women are unaware of or do not take advantage of a mentor/mentee relationship.

Even though in the past women have held attitudes of fear of success it is slowly changing during the 1980's. For example, women are steadily topping barriers and assuming leadership in fields that were traditionally male. A decade ago, according to the U.S. News and World Report (Nov. 29, 1982), the nation's space program allowed no women astronauts. Now there are eight women astronauts. Ten years ago even the largest U.S. banks could count on one finger of one hand their number of female vice-presidents. Now some giant banks have more than 100 women as vice-presidents and even one or two as senior vice-presidents.

In 1972, women in companies with 100 or more employees held only one in eight management jobs. Now they hold one out of five. Ten years ago 13 women served in the House of Representatives. There are now 21 who serve, which sets an all time record. Just over 300 women sat in state legislatures in 1972. The current figure exceeds 900.

Women who comprise 51.3 percent of the U.S. population still only represent 5 percent of the executives in the top 50 corporations, 10 percent of astronauts, 12 percent of the state legislators, and two percent of U.S. Senators (U.S. News and World Report, Nov. 29, 1982).

Have women changed? Is there still such a phenomenon for women known as fear of success? Or are women changing? Are the 1980's women no longer afraid of success?

Method

Subjects

Subjects for the study were from two distinct types of female populations. They included midwestern women professionals who belonged to business and professional womens organizations and students enrolled in classes in the education department of a medium-sized, midwestern university.

Materials

A 20-item "Fear of Success" questionnaire was devised by the researchers. Items on the questionnaire were representative of attitudes found in the literature which contribute to the fear of success. For example, one question asked the subjects if they doubted their abilities even though others expressed confidence in their performance. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert-scale (with 4 being always true and 1 being never true) to evaluate items. Possible score range on the questionnaire is from 20 to 80 points. The higher the score, the more probability the subject has a fear of success. The questionaire was piloted on a group of 34 women professionals.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed at professionals womens organizations by the reserchers and in the individual classrooms by professors. Subjects were asked to fill out the questionnaire. Confidentiality was assured. The inventory took subjects about 10 minutes to complete. Inventories were then collected and the data and the demographics were analyzed.

Results

Data from the survey instrument were collected from a total of 204 subjects. Results of this study can only be generalized to a similar population of women. A mean score was tabulated for each of the 20 items. The total mean score was calculated to be 38.7 with a standard deviation of 8.05. See Table 1.

Table 1
Mean Score for each question and Total Mean Score

Question	Mean	S.D.
1	2.80	.657
2	2.67	.857
3	2.10	.847
4	1.96	.812
5	2.03	.796
6	1.61	.711
7	2.35	.896
8	1.28	.570
9	1.27	.546
10	1.36	.656
11	1.87	.729
12	2.16	.768
13	2.02	.800
14	1.59	.733
15	1.83	.689
16	1.65	.762
17	1.88	.878
18	1.86	.737

19	2.27	.883
20	2.04	.858
Total	38.72	8.056

Three one-way, analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed on the total mean score and each of the demographic questions. There were no significant differences.

An examination of the demographics revealed that 45% of the subjects were students; with the second highest category of subjects (36%) being professional; 8% were clerical; 7% were management and 4% were technical. Thirty percent of the respondents were in the 35-49 age group category, 30% being under 24 years old; 26% in the 25-34 year old cagetgory; while 10% were in the 50-64 year age category and 4% over age 64.

A look at education reveals that 44% had "some college hours"; while 28% had at least a bachelors degree; 12% had only a high school education and 3% had a doctorate.

Discussion

The fact that there were no extreme scores and no significant data found on the 20-item questionnaire lead researchers to the following conclusions. First, the possibility exists that the questionaire is flawed. Although the researchers believe the questionnaire has a face validity, perhaps, it does not, in fact, measure the concept of fear of success.

A second interpretation might be that the sample size was too-small. The demographics revealed a fairly even distribution of professionals and education levels, however, given the sample size of 204, there were not many in each cell.

A third conclusion the researchers draw is that the answer to the question--"Fear of success in women--Is there such a phenomenom?" is no, there is not. Horner's (1968) original concept of motive to avoid success in women was conceived and interpreted 20 years ago. Even though the concept of fear of success in women is still discussed in popular literature, familial, psychological and societal influences on women have changed.

Families tend to raise their daughters differently. With the birth rate decline in the United States, perhaps more parents are instilling traditional masculine values, such as competitiveness, in their daughters. There are also many more role models for women who exhibit competitive behaviors. It is not uncommon to see adult daughters taking over family businesses. This was almost unheard of 20 years ago. Most mothers work outside the home. In fact, the "traditional" family of father-goes-to-work, mother-stays-at-home accounts for less than 10 percent of American families.

Attitudes and beliefs have changed also. Literature suggests that women are starting to have a more internal locus of control. Johnson & Black (1981) say that women are beginning to believe that they have control over their lives and not believe

that their successes are not due to just "luck", or "right place, right time".

Women have a tendency not to feel guilty about leaving their children to go to work. In fact, a few companies are beginning to help alleviate any purported guilt feelings on the part of parents by providing on-site day cares for their employees.

Many cultural changes have occurred in the past twenty years. More and more women in the work force have climbed the corporate ladder. Although the numbers are not overwhelming, it is not that uncommon to see women at the top of their field. In the past few years there has been an increase in the number of small business started by women in the U.S.

In our culture, women now have more role models of successful women in the business and corporate world. Even more women report having mentors.

It is the researchers belief that the study should be repeated, using a larger population of women. Another suggestion is that the study should be repeated and include a male population. The instrument should also be validated. However, it is also assumed by the researchers that even though the results can only be generalized to similar populations, if the phenomenom of fear of success exists it is very obscure.

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